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THE MEXICANS:

A Romance.

BY

CHARLES E. HOOPER.

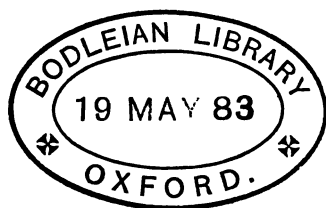
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THE MEXICANS :

A ROMANCE.

N.B.—Probably no one who is acquainted with the remarkable appearance which most of the names of Mexican celebrities connected with the conquest of the Aztec empire by Hernando Cortez, present, or the more remarkable sound which a European's attempt to articulate some of these must result in (and if here and there one be grand-sounding, few, I think, are easy), will condemn me for bestowing on the hero and heroine of this tale, names more calculated for English pronunciation. In searching out such from a very opposite source, I have tried to choose them sufficiently uncommon not to wound the most fastidious.

The liberty I have taken in employing several sorts of metre throughout this poem, is one which, provided all sorts have been used with an equal amount of success, whatever that may be, only Conventionality's self can blame. And if one kind has been more appropriately, or actually better made use of than the others, the gentle reader may console him or herself that the writer at least will profit by this fact, on reviewing or seeing reviewed his work.

C. E. H.

CANTO I.

A MILE below one thought those waters spread,
Glistening and sapphire, in whose silent bed
An heaven-tired spirit slumbering seemed to lie,
Inscrutable, but speaking to the eye

As stillness to the ear ; and stretched away
Upon the lake's far shore wild forests lay.
The lone and pensive wanderer who views
Such scenes from such sweet heights, not shape and
hues,

But life and love must read ; for when we scan,
Not from some giant peak the realms of man
A doubtful chart with hills embossed, but all
So far and yet so near there seems to fall
A charm upon our senses, a soft stream,
Content expectancy,—a lovely dream
Wherein we're there as well as here, reclined
Beneath yon shadowy trees, too lavish mind
Seeming to touch what only eyesight gives :
Then do we feel, and love to feel, there lives
Around us mother Nature's kindred soul,
And all we gaze on parts of one great whole ;
Ourselves her children, ready to forswear
Arcadias and Edens to be there.

The lake below ; but all around a scene
Had baffled Nature's witchcraft, tho't might
glean

Its glories of her. There—no barren hill ;
A garden hung, where now the natural rill
Cascaded through wild grottos, spreading fern,
And round the feet of giants aged and stern ;
And now the fountain in its basin played,
And hurried down the hill, anon waylaid
By others where gay fishes glid and glanced,
And grisly statues stood that half enhanced
The magic of the spot,—poor mockeries
To put by life (except that contrast is
An honest flatterer), yet through which there
shined
A nation's sombre genius, a mind
Ill-housed in truth, but not untouched with awe,—
Too little aspiring to spoil aught one saw,
Save if they made one long the more to see
What baffles art in all her majesty,
Beauty and youth and life, soft, yearning, free.
About where shrubs of all variety
That make their dwelling 'neath that prosperous
sky,
Of leaf and blossom manifold and rare,
And so enphalanxed as to seem most fair,—

And 'gainst dark trees that sentry-like stood near,
As if to stay the plundering bee's career
Along his airy road of flower tops. These
Most subtly chosen in contrast sure to please,
By hands well-used and willing, from a store
Unknown to other climes, breathed silent lore—
Bordering the robe their leafier kindred made,
Which, hung on graceful terraces, arrayed
This hill-side kinglily. Here porphyry flights
Traversed the mossy paths ; on wooded heights,
And through still vistas, where bright creepers
dressed
(Nature allowed by art to guide them best)
The meeting boughs, till all seemed one live
ceiling
With perfume-dropping pendants downward
feeling—
Through these and upon those pavilions gleamed,
Gay, airy, strange, as if less seen than dreamed,
And gold-barred aviaries half-hidden teemed.
Now steep descents through these charmed wilds
would lead,
As 'twere into an air-god's arms, and feed

The gazer with sublime yet sickening pangs ;
Then all will be forgotten, as he hangs,
Lost to himself in gazing, o'er a scene,
Where magic glens, rill-traversed, shadowy green,
Stretching t'wards that bright lake, compelling on,
Make wizard Fancy's self out-charmed and wan.
Now turning suddenly the path would wend
'Neath jutting rocks, with twinèd trees to lend
A safeguard on its steeper side, and e'er
New views, more bounded, but no whit less fair,
Start forth and smile.

In some such place as this,
Which asked but beings to be filled with bliss ;
Stretched on a marble seat, in the deep shade
A circling canopy of foliage made,
A goddess in her grove, the fairy queen
Of this sweet solitude, yet unserene,
And touched, and touching all, with tranquil
sadness,
Though meet to fill aught living soul with glad-
ness,—
Cleora bent her head on one soft arm,
Or raised it, now to greet some air-borne charm

Or dread some spell approaching hour by hour
The garden of a life, whose every flower
Grew brighter day by day, yet tenderer shrunk
From each rough hand. Now fixed and now
sunk,

Those shadowy orbs of hers betrayed a strife
Of hopes and fears within : her bosom, rife
With pangs unwont, 'neath its light covering
Now panted, now stood still, as if to fling
With hard-got strength a burden off, whilst came
Blushes, now troublous, now of gentler shame,
That melted into pallor at a sigh.

The playful lips despite the pensive eye,
The jet-black hair with pearls and fronds inbent
Disordered now, the lovely neck half-bent,
The chiselled features, and the beauteous frame,
Through which quick fragile youth seemed yet to
claim

A perfectness beyond itself,—the all
Of this fair budding maiden, seemed to call
The very trees around to sad surprise
That aught should dim those seldom-tearful
eyes,

Or make the scenes she loved so much forgot.
They seemed to whisper, " Sweet ! what ails thee
—what ? "

Stray sunbeams caught that eye, whose fondest
care

Could make the tear-drop that would gather there
A trembling brilliant, but could nothing more :

The breeze would ruffle her raven tresses o'er,
As if sore vexed that his unchallenged kiss
Could do no greater good nor harm than this.

But sun and breeze—ah, could they follow her
Into the woman's soul, that 'gan to stir
Within ; though she was yet so much the child,
That, turning from sad-seeming thoughts, she
smiled,

E'en laughed, to see the bird pursue its mate,
Whose plundering beak had been more fortunate ?
Cleora's sunny days had changed, become
Measures of time of one too simple sum
She would not have completed, and a dread
Gnawed her young heart, yet ineffectual fed
On daring Hope, that haply—who shall say ?
Hung round the image of one far away.

O'er Mexico's fair garden cities spread
The wings of threatening conquest, dusk and
dread ;

Sons of the far, mysterious East had come—
Some called them most malignant foes, and some,
The promised emissaries, good and great,
Of a departed god, and things of fate.
For dauntless Cortez and his fiery band,
A year before had threaded this strange land,
Explored the lake-embosomed town, and there
Chained the imperial dragon in his lair ;
And when the nation's ire was roused at last,
The Sorry Night, with all its horrors passed ;
Discomfited th' opposing hosts, and found
A breathing time in Tlasc'la's friendly ground.
Again the dreaded Conqueror was near ;
His gallant captains, dead at last to fear,
So often and so strangely sped before
Their leader's daring ; and of that same shore
The hardy sons of Tlascala (old foes
Of kindred Mexico) : and then, who knows
How many saints kept shadowy company
With that stern Spaniard's crew, whose eagle eye

Saw past the flash of gold, and haven of fame,
Half truthful Superstition's beacon-flame,
Whence 't seemed to catch a magic mightier than
The soldier's fire,—the purpose of a man.
Nor least, nor least alert 'mongst Cortez' powers,
His beautiful Marina, in calm hours
Enchantress from his harder cares, and e'er
Love-made interpretress, though frail and fair,
Of oft blood-sealéd threats, through conquest's
tide

Kept star-beam vigil at his barque's rough side.
But now Tezcuco's walls afforded for
The Spaniard's train a timely home, and more—
Her new-installed, bold, independent lord,
Stretched them his hand, and peoples over-awed
By a new power, or glad to 'scape the old,
Yielded submission, were it base or bold ;
For that bright sovereign city of the vale,
'Neath which the others all had seemed to quail,
Was strong alone whilst terrors could avail.

Amongst Tezcuco's chiefs, Cleora's sire,
Obedient to his Prince's known desire,

Yielded allegiance to imperial Spain ;
And once, alas ! amidst her father's train,
This jewel, bright as her own native sun,
Had charmed too soon the ardent eye of one
'Mongst Cortez' cavaliers, Alonzo named,
Young, noble, favoured, if scarcely famed.
Nor was there gift, too great to freely grace
The herald band of the half-heavenly race
Of the far East ; not gold and men alone ;
Their dark-eyed daughters were no more their
own,
Nor had as else a voice to guide their fate
When Cortez spoke. Thus poor Cleora's state :
She heard th' invaders' praise on every lip,
Yet stood as o'er a chasm, about to slip,
Whilst heedless friends in safety — so they
thought,
Admired the dizzy depth. But what had wrought
A dread, unshared by her country's maids,
Of the bold 'venturer who their land invades,
In young Cleora's heart, and e'er as fades
The mournful spell from her fair face away,
What gives those triumph smiles alternate sway ?

Brightest 'mongst youthful memories that she had
And 'mid her present ponderings most sad,
The likeness of a boy, her playmate ere
In civil strife their friendly sires did tear
Themselves and them apart, was oftentimes by,
And by her now, with wildly mournful eye
That e'en in childhood kindled at her smile.
Tezcucó's sovereignty at stake awhile,
Hers chose the rightful heir, and his another,
The wiser, manlier, but the younger brother,
Whose claim dread Mexico in vain forbade,
And forcéd met half way; who now, too glad
To take the Spaniard's hand and wholly reign
(The elder too was dead) appeared again
In his renownéd capitol, brought back
His exiled friends, nor longer had to lack
Submission from all those who were not fled
Into the sister city. So, but led
By other aim than others felt or guessed,
Harpalion, bravest, wisest, and most blessed
With his lord's love, of all who now returned,
Had sought his father's friend, with heart that
burned

To see his childhood's fairest star, more fair
To greet his manhood's glance ; nor having care,
So cherished in his soul was this fond thought,
To hope aught less than fancy. And 'tis wrought :
They meet ; he marks her blushes with delight,
As, with her hand in his, he hastes to plight
His changless love, and in the self-same breath
Tells her a tale of mystery—of death,
And sees her sympathetic eyes brim o'er.
'Twas at the earliest in the civil war,
His father, on an embassy set out
To faithless Mexico (whose priestly rout
Cherished deep enmity against him), there,
Or so 'twas said, fell in some horrid snare ;
At least had ne'er returned. But his young
son,
Firm in the path his hapless sire 'd begun,
Foremost amongst Tezcucó's rebel band,
First in the council, first to wield the brand,
A wonderment to friends and foes alike,
Left not a moment blank when he could strike.
And vainly did Mexitli's ogres groan
There wanted victims for the bloody stone,

And he, the handsome boy, the foeman hot,
Was destined to its pangs,—all brought him not.
Awhile enraptured with Cleora's tears,
Harpalion's woe is lost. But soon he hears
(And from her sire in accent more than cold)
A Spaniard wants a bride, and she, enrolled
For Christian ceremonies then must be
E'er at that Spaniard's beck and call, and he—
The thought he could not brook, and speechless
went,

Nor let the sire suspect he had intent,
More than to smother memory in pride,
(Not mourn a fruitless love) to be denied.

Thus when Cleora heard her doom, they said
Harpalion too had gone. It sunk like lead
Into her heart, yet she despaired not quite,
And soon a message had made hope more bright;
A meeting was to be (the coming night)
In the still bower she could with ease attain,
(He knew the place of old), and swift regain
The terrace whence her chamber opened. Hard
She tried to picture him, the child discard,

And see as she had once—oft should ? And so
The half-affrighted smiles would come and go,
As in that garden paradise she lay,
Till at her father's bidding called away.

The chieftain sat as one whose cares were few,
In state, at ease, 'mid his divan, in view
Of downy lawns, where now he spied his daughter
Slow wending t'wards him with the slave who'd
sought her ;

Nor asked if man's, less woman's, heart might feel
Wounds pride and luxury could never heal.

His fragrant chocolate beside him stood ;

He smoked his pipe—it was of gold-set wood ;

And ever-and-anon he cast a look,

Half-fearful and half-charmed, (so some gilt book
Tells on the savage eye although unread)

On a new god, new men, new zeal, new dread
Set up apace ; for then as e'er were led

Slaves of old idols abjectest to new—

(Whose worship yet might be a whit more true ;

And truth much masked is better than a lie).

How far is faith, how near credulity :

It was a crucifix placed near his side,
Long lingering mock of him who noblest died,
That when the ebon and ivory thing he spurns,
Clings to man's heart, whose folly still discerns
In place of God the offspring of his fear,
The sin-shocked ruler of an ill-drawn sphere,
Not Nature's Soul, man-imagéd, Whose are
Unbending love and purpose, free and far.—
Cleora entered and the chieftain broke
Into a kindly smile, and kindly spoke.
He was a jovial yet a grim old lord,
Indolent here but soldierly abroad ;
Of temper most serenely obstinate,
A sort of axle in the wheel of fate,
That went not far, but failed not to keep pace
With whirling human kind. Cleora's face
Looked pale perchance, at least he kindly said—
“ My girl, thou'rt tired. Then early hie to bed,
Nor 'xpect again as heretofore to sink
Into thy lonely virgin slumbers. Think
To-morrow thou art blessed ” (he little knew ;
Poor child ! she thought not—how both might be
true

Nor yet incongruous), "the mystic right
That makes thee equal in the strangers' sight
With their wise dames, they first administer ;
I am half minded to 't myself, or were
These strangers not so jealous for their God,
Or I not old to leave the path I trod
So many years ago I should be. Then,
First made a fellow-worshipper, again—
They'll make thee young Alonzo's cherished
bride."

Cleora almost shrieked, but, quick to hide
Her useless consternation, answered—"Father !
Must I so soon ?—a thousand times I'd rather
Wed with the meanest peasant of our land,
Than take a stranger's gods, a stranger's hand,
And leave for ever all I cling to here.
Oh ! does no patriot love or patriot fear
Speak to my father (oh—forgive my boldness),
And say—beware a stranger's faith ? Your cold-
ness,
Unwont as 'tis, does make my fancy chill
More fearing them who —yet I'm yours until"—

“ Until thou art Alonzo’s, silly child !
And find’st thy sire as wise as thou art wild
To banter with his wisdom,” he replied.
She bowed submission, and half-smiled, half-
sighed,
With fierce-conflicting feeling as she left
The unsuspecting chief, of shelter reft,
Save ’twere in one how dear but dangerous cleft.

CANTO II.

STILL was the night, as still as though
The vital stream had ceased to flow,
'Twixt earth's deep veins and plumèd trees;
Bright was the moon, as hushed the breeze—
And that calm light, that silvery pall,
Borne by the silent shadowy all
With ghostly looks, did seem to say :
“ Now are the obsequies of day :
Now never more the sun shall rise ;
Eternal sleep shall bathe the eyes
Of Nature's children where they are ;
And nothing, save the wand'ring star,
Shall rest the searcher's troubled sight,
From the dread beauties of witchèd night.”
Or else it was the breathless calm
Of aspiration or alarm,
As Earth kept watch, expectant for
Some spirit rout, should pass the door
Of spaceless Being into air,
And gather in dim phalanx there.

Another time Cleora's mind
Had fancied genii ruled the hour ;
But now she only looked behind,
And only hastened to her bower,
Afraid of human steps, and strong
To hear but his she loved. Nor long
She had to wait. The silent night
Seemed as they met as heavenly bright,
As filled with music, as if day
Had fooled the stars and found his way
Into that moment stealthily.
Like wings of nervous butterfly,
Now spread, now closed, as't drinks its fill,
Cleora's eyelids wavered, till
The drooping orbs at last were raised,
And wildly, tenderly she gazed
Into her lover's, as if so
Her inmost soul ebbed forth to flow
With his thro' vales where lovers' spring
Does promise bliss, and promising
Is more than bliss itself. She nor
Once glanced behind nor gazed before ;

Her desperate story was untold :
Till he, half-maddened to behold
So dear a prize e'en yet at stake,
Hastened, whilst still the spell might break,
(When she, half-startled, laid her cheek
Fondly upon his breast) to speak.

" Thou know'st, Cleora, how I've followed him
Who rules this state, in conflicts long and grim ;
It was my father's lead—thou knowest not
How good a sire he was, nor thinkest what
The kindly firmness of his life begot
In my else puny boyhood, as I grew
From fancying much t' accomplish sometimes too,
That made it harder losing him ! And more,
It was the course my thoughts bade take before,
And doubly after that sad loss, to fight
Against the monstrous chief and priests, whose
right,
For so hypocrisy calls that it steals
In league with thievish ignorance, ever seals
The murders, rapes, oppression, labourer's pain,
That please their talons, hate, lust, pride, and gain..

And so I've fought 'gainst Mexico, and oft
Opposed in council them who gravely scoffed,
With selfish, fearful, custom's solemn tongue,
'Gainst whole despite of men's old chains, and
stung

The slothful into fire to burn away
The one great yoke. Alas—its horrid sway
Is but repeated in how many more.
Ah! sweet Cleora—could I ever pour—
Why may I not?—my heart's next dearest themes
To thee I love, into thine ears! There gleams
A light in thy dear eyes at all I speak;
And once before I have been blessed to seek
Thy hearing for my wayward aspirations.
Yet 'tis a daring thing, that all our nations,
And men and maids much more will quail to
do,

And I alone have ventured, to think through
The painted screen of all we have been taught,
And see, if not what is, that it is nought;
And know men fools to be or love the thing
Impostor vanity doth crown, or sing
Praise to a tyrant god. Do I divine

Thy thoughts, courageous maiden, following
mine? ”

“ Oh ! be my god ! ” the maiden cried : “ Thou art.
And I to hear the secrets of thy heart,
And melt away the dulness of my own,
Will school myself, till like thee god-like grown
I’m worthy thee. Nay ! more than woman now
To be so chosen I am ! ”

“ Most tender vow ! ”

The youth rejoined, “ then listen—heretofore
Our prince I’ve served, with Mexico at war,
Vowing, not weakly vengeance for a wrong
That blood can ne’er make right, but purpose
strong,
Not ’gainst the perpetrators of my sorrow,
But that foul empire-fiend, whence dogs do
borrow

The powers they lack themselves to look like men.
But now, Cleora, I’m a rebel again.
This prince hath linked himself with foreign power
Greater than his. It was an evil hour

Wherein he yielded : not alone that they
Would tear thee from me, nor in haste I say,
Better the empire that I hate live on
Till its own curses wear its features wan,
Or men arise to renovate their race,
Than that its sons, inured to debase
Themselves to slaves, be vanquished 'neath the
blows
And the false charm of proud and jealous foes,
Whose gods, perchance, are better, and whose
might
Greater than theirs, who so much more are blight
Upon the weedy harvest of their soil,
That still is theirs. How oft this blood does
boil,
How oft these eyes are wet, to feel and see
The snares that others blindly scorn to flee,
And worse, the glorious remedy that lies
Yet unimagined in their cold minds' eyes,
Laughed at, declaimed, although untried, un-
known !—
Oh, Love ! my thoughts, to bow at thy heart's
throne,

Do thronging, maim each other, and I waste,
But will no more, the hour. Dost know I've
faced

Already the proud Spaniard's wrath, repelled
Our fierce, deluded countrymen, and held,
With a small, faithful following, my ground
In mountain fastness, bare and boulder-bound ;
Have parted with the king as friendship would,
Whose imprecations on my hardihood
Did sadden and yet strengthen my lone heart ?
For freedom and for thee I strike. Canst part
With all but me ? ”

No hot and fleeting thrill
Spoke as her passionate lips proclaimed, “ I will.”

“ Then list : to-night I haste, disguised as now.”

“ But not alone ? ” Cleora shrieked. “ Oh, how
Bitterest knowledge in sweet hopes does hide,
And, when betrayed, so shatters them ! The bride
Of the proud Spaniard never will I be :
To-morrow I am with the dead or thee.

To-morrow's the black day that I should wed
With whom I hate ! Oh ! rather—chilly dread !—
I vow myself to the unmindful grave ;
Nor think, Harpalion, that I only rave.”
She drew a fold of her white girdle down,
And there an iztli dagger shone.

A frown

Passed o'er his brow, a shudder through his frame,
And as th' admiring smile redoubled came,
He gently moved her hand, and hid away
The sorry tok'n of trueness where it lay ;
Few moments mused, and then abrupt exclaimed,
As one who struggled with mischance, not
blamed—
“ Hence then on foot—my litter waits not far ;
We can escape unwatched from where we are.”

Most urgent danger passed, their pathway led
Across still, moonlit lawns, where from 'ts rough
bed
The stream, the one unsleeping thing, complained,
And here and there a wide, weird view was gained,

Whence shone the lake, resplendent as a shawl
Some night-commissioned angel had let fall ;
And 'neath o'erarching trees, whose lonelier leaves
The moonbeams drew below. No longer grieves
The warrior at an ill that tenderer thought
Drives from his mind ; for every step now brought
To him more exultation, and more rest
To her, whose thoughts were lost in feeling
blessed.

He spake, his broken theme continuing—
“ I would have said my last hope was to fling
Myself on Mexico's support : I had
Appointed at the break of day, though sad
To be so pressed, the Emperor's delegate
To meet, and for the present link my fate
(Not trust myself within those treacherous walls)
With his, to have his aid. But louder calls
The voice of what I must and gladly may.
Nay ! chide not, love, nor ask me to delay
A moment to secure thee my retreat,
Though I had planned a better thee to greet ;
Whate'er betide us then thou wilt be mine !
It tells me send and haughtily decline

To touch the ground 'fore priest-rid'n empire: so
To make her an irreconcil'ble foe,
(Ah! think not I'll appoint another time;
Above my faithless weakness do I climb),
So to be thrown, with thee, my gem to keep,
My planet to inspire with purpose deep,
On this one arm, with those few friends it leads,
Bound in the bonds of common aims and needs,
And equal manhood, love, and fear for nought!
Oh! if there be in men, as I have thought,
A rill of might that, fatefully held back,
Themselves in noble confidence can slack—
A something that through ages whilst they live
Does live to teach and strengthen, as they give
Their minds and hearts unto the soul of all,
Holding communion with the stars that call
Best blessings down, itself more great than aught
They worship in the gods themselves have wrought
Out of themselves, fair reason grown distraught—
A God to whom all other gods are dust,
A law by which all others are unjust :—
If I have thought aright, if such there be,
And they who find it are both wise and free,

And lifted from the dream of earth, and strong
To quell the fierce and frenzied ranks of wrong,
Weeping but wav'ring not ; with hidden charm
That for their cause's sake does ward off harm
Which comes in darkness ; and with willéd might
To vanquish armaments that shame the light :
Then joy with me, and fear not but I'll make
All odds mere child's play for Cleora's sake.
To-night we'll rest secure ere sinks the moon
At my first outpost. 'Twill be reached full soon.
Yon eyes of heaven shall proclaim us wed,
And blessed shadows canopy our bridal bed."

'Tis sweet to drink from pictures, where

The artist's magic has spell-bound

Mind's loveliest looks of radiant air ;

'Tis sweet to feel the soul of sound

Mingle with ours, and bear it on,

Conscious, but thoughtless, weariless but wan.

'Tis sweet in solitude to gaze

On ruins, whence the human eye

That reared and scanned them in lost days,

Looks feebly back, to claim the sigh

Which fancy gives to, that the spot
Must to the hours reflect, but knows not what.

'Tis sweet to read the gentle lore
Of sun descending hill-sides pale,
To lift the robe of darkness o'er
The breathing bosom of the vale ;
At noon, beside the sedgy stream
To lie in rippling shade, breeze-kissed, and dream.

'Tis sweet at eve, beside the deep,
To stand and watch the sunset flame,
And marvel sights so fair can sleep,
And kindred wake, but not the same :
To mount upon the wings of night,
All else bedimmed into calm pondering's light.

'Tis sweet to stem the glittering main,
Seeking, we know not what new scenes
And dear adventures ; and to strain
The eye o'er space that intervenes,
And fancy o'er how much beside,
When home, sweet home re-echoes o'er the tide.

'Tis sweet to hear the chariot wheels
Of tempest to the restless soul,
That proudly likens the throbs it feels
To that fierce flash, and that long roll,
Rending the earth-encircling sky,
And searching heaven's high, holy sanctuary.

But what so sweet as love, when two
Fond souls in the before but one,
But born 'neath diverse stars, anew
Each of the other found, do shun
All else, and through the groves astray
Of rapture, fancy the fair hours at play ?

Upon a mountain's brow that overtowered
That mystic vale, where, weirdly beautiful,
Th' abodes of men, 'midst woodlands clustered,
seemed
A glistening fairy tale, whence no more crime
Than children charge ill-genii with, need speak
Harsh to the gazer's thoughts, and sorrow none,
And fairer and more witching still shone forth
Those gem-like lakes, and that where Mexico,

Sublimely throned, seemed smiling at the homage
Of mountain-hanging forests, that bent down
Towards the valley's centre, where she sat :
Drinking the scene as those whose senses sleep,
Who dream the things around in powerless trance,
Yet whose high thoughts, made joyous with the
sense

Of what they think not of, do soar away
Into abodes more holy still : there gazed,
Thus sweetly rapt, Harpalion and his love.
The girl was kneeling, and upon his arm —
Whose hand, half buried in her tresses, swayed
Their jetty waves, as might love's urchin gambol,
And laughing, kiss to spray a tropic sea,—
Lightly was resting hers ; lest was't the breeze,
Jealous, should waft her fairy frame into
His dizzy, undisputed castle of space,
Save—for her moving lips were mute with love—
Her touch might waken her lover's vigilance?—
The dawn—for it was dawn, and this fair scene,
Came to her heart, revealing, as it were,
Whilst the warm light o'erglimmered that pale
brow,

The magic blossom of consummated love,
That, sprung in one dim night obliviously,
Making the stars seem fragrant, not till now
Was imaged in mind's fount in shape and hue
And being and locality. Half dreading
To gaze, for fear its lines were not so fair
As 'ts scent had been—perchance for fear 'twould
prove,

Like dreams we wake from and would dream again
But cannot, too divine, and melt away,
And leave her solitary and ashamed—
She had clung wildly to her lover's arm
As they ascended that rough hill, to meet
The golden sun. But now, as flashing back
From his deep eyes, and o'er those features which
Seemed, as they were, the outward moulding of
The faith within—intensest fancies there,
But various-hued planets, ornaments
Of one controlling soul—the dawn that, though
Voiced with its own reality, yet seemed
To her fond heart but made to make him lovely,
Rode up profoundest heaven, and took the watch
From Phosphor waxing weary at his task :

Whilst she saw this, and gazed on him, there came
The strength of love, and with inspiréd eyes
She knew his soul and hers thence leagued to plant
That blossom of earthly ecstasy, unshrunk,
In beatific soil of Love that knows
No selfish throb, how sweet soe'er, but beats
In the warm bosom of the human all.
Yet had she cursed the wings, though Vict'ry's
own,
Had borne her from his side, and yet, though
strong,
So weak she felt, to loose her gentle hold,
To part two footsteps' space, two moments' span,
Had seemed an agony.

The warrior's garb,
No longer an obscure disguise, was changed.
The graceful habit of his compeer chiefs
More graceful seemed on him. The silk-fine vest
Of cotton spun, close fitting to the frame ;
The golden belt, whence his long iztli sword
Hung loosely ; the black-pluméd helm, unwont,
For unsurmount' with rampant beast, but bound
With emblem sprays of a wild evergreen ;

The skirt and loose-linked mantle, deftly wrought
Of that strange feather-work, long since forgot,
Whereon the artists of that day and land
Expended all their skill, with innate taste
Blending soft down with bolder plumage, heaping
Unnumbered hues in their strange, choice device,
As fit as many ; these again he wore.

Anon the lover's heart broke stillness thus :—
“ Gaze love ! is not the world to our two minds
A realler thing than to all minds beside,
Realler and fairer, though more overflowed
With hazy lies that stifle but not wake
Yon dreaming cities ; where in time to come
May not the voice of Truth at last be loud,
More to be wondered at and loved because
The fear and flattery Pride does give his gods
(And calls them humble praise) shall melt away
Into the selfish hell they came from, nor
Pollute the light shall make their darkness seen,
And then disperse it ? Love, it seems to me,—
For let us play the jugglers of their own
And others' reasons a more subtle trick,

And find beneath the magic cap they swear
Has treasures in it, but forbear to lift,
Treasures for us they dream not of, and snatch
The thoughts of greater souls than theirs, that they
Do reverently make a mock of, bright
As they were whilom coined—this morn it seems
That like as in the mystic right they call
Kindling New Fire, when the adoréd flame
Is carried far and near, while Pleiades
Leaves the horizon longing; then the sun,
In all his changeless splendour floating up,
Does spread rejoicing, and proclaim to man
Exemption from the dread award of crime
(As if the heavens should damn him, and the sin
That makes its curse were lovelier than they),
So even now the light of our linked love,
Atoning all the jealous load of fears
That thronged us yestere'en, through every vein
Breathing its fire, is now how sweetly sealed
With yonder orb, that constantly does give
His all-enlivening looks away, to teach
That man should be as strong, unwav'ring, and
How much more great than he! And as the priests

Do ruthless rob their victim's heart to send
His soul to paradise; so hast thou mine,
Beloved Cleora! and so mine is there,
And walks the sky as liefly as the sun,
Singing and chapleted with roses. Nay!
I'll no more trifle thus. Beloved one, turn!
Oh! there are vales but little less fair than this,
'Mid which hell's dragons' teeth do drop with
blood,
So fair—so foul, alas!—where will we dwell,
Making ourselves a wonderment, a hope
For all who will be free, implanting love
By the sheer might of ours, and waxing strong,
That when these savage foes have torn themselves,
Neither shall vanquish us. Oh! some such home;
The breezy forests where our state shall be,
It seems as though alone, from some wild height
Liest to this we viewed together! Say,
Am I a fool to pour my warrior brogue
And longing fancies in thy gentle ears,
Attentive as they be? Alas! my soul
Must push these dearly soft confections by,
Soon as the camp be reached, and eat the bread

Not of forefiguring, but foresight, since
We haply must engage or haply flee."

"Oh! let me climb," Cleora cried, "as well
As does the forest creeper, that alone
Could but o'erspread the ground ingloriously,
But 'gainst some mighty stem may mount almost
As high as 'ts branches into heaven, and bend
With every wind can make them sigh or sway,
And livelong list its counsels. Let me be
So favoured; and thy sternest plannings or
Thy gentlest fancies, breathed on me shall not
Be spok'n in vain. Oh! let me be thy shadow,
And, like thy shadow, live and die in being,
Or die to be not,—ever by thy side."

CANTO III.

The hour drew near ; Harpalion's faithful band
That night would flee the tempest-threatened
vale,

To find, in some less-menaced neighbouring land,
A home where others might be won to hail
The banner they had bled for. Mid the few
Who shared his counsels most, nor knew to fail
In aught they bade, the chieftain stood to view
The well-known scene, as one made strong to
break,

Yet loath to break, a spell, that inward grew
Of joy and sorrow mixed, in thrills that shake
Such souls as his. A cry of doubt amid
His officers by-standing rose, to wake
His wonted vigilance. For swiftly glid,
Emerging from the forest at its base
Up the steep hill-side, a fleet spy, who hid—
Nor breathless, for his calling was to chase
The steps of day and night where horses none
Eased human labour—bid them haste and brace

Their spirits to encounter, for the sun

No sooner should be fled, than they attacked
By the night-fighting Spaniards, who'd begun,—

Haply beneath Alonzo's guidance,—(backed
By swarms of the more mortal natives, who,
Like clumsy armour round them might be
hacked,

And straight repaired with kindred souls; for
few

Of them themselves were spared from Cortez'
side),

Ere then their expedition. As there flew

O'er those scarred faces, shadows as betide
When courier tempest-clouds o'errun the sky,

Nor one indifferent, nor one belied
By fearful glance, and the young leader's eye

Saw in his captains' this resolve, the word
Of ready exhortation, in a sigh

Of strong communion died. With glance that
stirred

Their inner souls he turned. "At once prepare
To make the march proposed," was all they
heard,

Save, "we are strong," he added—and they were.

Now were they prisoners, and if too bold
For executioners to seize, had jailers there
Around their fastness ; but they could behold
The plain that once descended to, should be

The road to Liberty, below them rolled
In waves of field and forest. Better flee

Their safer height for this—make swift retreat,
Or hew their passage thro' the foe, and see

Some land might be a home ! In measured heat
The busy camp uprose itself ; and then,

One moment—it was all they had to meet,
Harpalion and Cleora gave again

With glances and quick pressure all their heart,
And all was told her : and among his men,

Directing and encouraging their start,
Like a half-vanished dream she saw him yet,

And wept—she knew not why. How deep the art,
Wherewith through that expectant day she'd met

The throbbing intervals of parting, and
The thoughts of peace with him, that made her fret
(Now calm, though sad) for some more kindly
land.

The wings of contest flapped. The stirring horn
Assailed those rocky heights, and backwards
borne

Met in mid-air the rival note, both hanging
O'er two contending armies, whence the clanging
Of wielded arms, rose, not so far above
The shaken plain; the night-awaken'd dove
Fled to the forest's inmost sanctuary.

And in one long and hoarsely-linked cry,
Hate, fear, pain, triumph, eagerness, and death,
With war cries, musket shots, and the forced
breath

Of peaceful earth 'neath turbulentest tread,
Heaped up their swift and sorry tones, and led
The helpless echoes in loud mock along.

The combat wavered. Deepest in the throng,
A bulwark for his own, destruction for
The foeman's lines, Harpalion onward bore:
But brave as was his band, it needs must fight
'Gainst hosts as thick as shadows of the night,
Made fierce to find the kindred whom they scorned
Thrice greater than themselves—thus sudden
warned

The free at heart are friends or foes indeed,
Theirs one most rightful sovereign, their known
need ;

And bold to see the Spanish horsemen charge.
Oft did the balance waver ; forces large
Depressed its either scale ; nor yet was't turned.
And direst in his ranks Alonzo burned--
The Indian maid he would have called his bride,
And raised above her race, thus lost!—with
pride,
And thwarted love's despair made vengeance-sick.

Amid the conflict met, save Death, with quick,
Unwearied fingers, had between them built
A wall of corpses—these two foes, who spilt
More blood, or leastwise spread more fear, and
wrought

Beyond their followers, though with diverse thought.
Harpalion 'saw his foe, o'er men and steeds
That 'neath him sunk, and quick as lightning feeds
The storm-shook earth, strange thoughts passed
thro' his breast.

“ Oh life—so diverse, so deceitful dressed,

How dare I make thee naked thus, and fill
The rock-rent clouds and winds with thee, how kill,
And leave in blood and dust, cast down to earth,
Thy rightful home—but that a vaster girth,
A greater man thou may'st encompass yet.
Ha ! can it be the rival I have met,
Who should be hated as men's 'should-bes' go—
Strike ! yet I hate him not. I fain would know
What shouts the storm, what whispers the sun's
ray

Into his heart, how dance his hours away,
How beauties of the world he views ; if e'er
Woe's molten rains upon his fellows tear
The smoothness of his skin. Alas ! my soul
Be in this arm and eye, a dire control."
A moment, and Alonzo had been faced,
With odds it ne'er had yet been his to taste :
But by a sudden flux, as when one wave
Cradles another in its seething grave,
A faltering in Harpalion's ranks had given
The enemy courage, and all onward driven,
The stream of men grew great and strong betwixt
The leader and his foe, nor ever fixed

Its fury on himself, but pressing on
When glancing back to, his whole heart grew wan
At that which met his eyes—they turned the day.

For lo! an Aztec priest in weed array
Stood in his soldiers' midst, and high upheld
A bloody trophy of some warrior felled
By other hands than his, and now despoiled—
The reeking heart. And he, as one who toiled
With demon haste for utterance, cast forth
From his pale lips such words of warning wrath
As could be summoned. "Do the gods forget
The feet that trample their holiness, or let
The soul that scorns the ways their might ordains,
Presumptuous, find a road, except of pains?
Is not the justice that our feeble arm
Ill guards from lawless Pride's fell craft and harm,
Heaven's hand that they may wound, but cannot
shun;
And changeless Truth, that sire hands down to
son,
Does not it start in judgment to declare—
It does, ye vipers!—that ye ill needs fare,

Except like us ye bow to know Heaven's will ?
For see ! with vengeance earth and air we fill :
The enemies of our nation's gods destroy
Each other fiercely ! Ye whom the decoy
Of blasphemy hems round, to-day shall fall
Before their darts ; but so shall perish all.
Come on the cursed avenger ! Come ye tools
In God's high hand, pour dust upon the fools
Who know not whence they are, and dare pro-
claim
A war with things supreme, whom *ye* can
shame ! ”

Authority's hypocrisy in vain
Looked calm, indignant truth : again, again
His eyes were fire ; his passion-furrowed brow
And livid cheeks, the moonlight sickened now,
And now, as turned aside, made dire the shade.

And that devoted band, e'en yet afraid
Of hell they'd fled, not wholly conquered, shook
And faltered, and their better selves forsook.
All but the captains, who, their leader's eye
More often watching, were more bold to die

In face of terrors visible and veiled :
These fought alone ; the stubborn cohort failed.
In vain their leader turned, in vain his might
A moment stayed pursuit,—it could not flight ;
In vain his voice,—that priest's more shrilly
 rose ;
A cloud obscured the moon ; he called to those
He knew would never flinch, a firm retreat,
And rallied but one friend a pulse's beat
From the great blank, who blessed with his last
 breath,
And stumbled o'er a new-filled home of Death !
His all seemed lost but life and—Heaven forbend
This hope was false !—his fondest, dearest friend.

Cleora's side was reached, where, in the rear,
'Neath a rock's shadow, overwhelmed with fear
(Despite the courage that from him she caught—
What wonder it had waned !), with thin escort
She waited long : and now, in joy that left
Misfortune's frown discomfited, and 'reft—
Alas ! in seeming only—of its sting,
She hastened to embrace him, and to wring

The tear to tell what she forgot to ask,
How much indeed was lost. Another task
In that soft instant gleamed on his mind's view :
A single horseman—'twas Alonzo—who,
Amid the stream of mad pursuit, had turned
Instinctive to explore that rock, had learned,
Now plainly knew, the truth, and onward bore,
Disdaining aid except his steed's ; so o'er
The bodies of the slain, and swiftly through,
Scattering and slaying those staunch guardsmen
few,
Was drawing near where they two stood alone.

Instant the warrior left her, and had thrown
Himself in young Alonzo's path, who, when
His charge proved ineffectual, turned again
On his quick foe, and momentarily they fought,
One mounted, one on foot. Then, fast as thought,
A blow but partly stayed (or 't had been death)
Had stretched the Spaniard, bleeding, out of
breath,
And helpless, on the ground. His agile foe,
Not 'reft of foresight in the moment's glow,

Had caught th' affrighted steed, and laughing,
cried,

Pressing Cleora's hand—"We'll learn to ride
The earth's four-footed god, and prove how swift
Danger can make 't, how well teach us to shift."

Of mind commanding, and of supple frame,
The fiery steed 'neath his control seemed tame,
As, lifting first Cleora on, then he
Bestrode the saddle, something joyfully.
Then as the wondering girl's deep eyes he marked
Wander to his fallen foe, and pained harked
Himself to those faint tones' indignant call
For help, or vengeance, or rough hands to thrall
The treasure that he clasped, with pity stung,
He raised Alonzo's horn from where it hung
Upon the saddle-bow, and loud and long
Pealed forth its well-known sound, and then, with
strong,
Commanding voice, and accent not his own,
'Caught from the wounded man's repeated groan,
The rescue and the war-cry; and as they
Arrested those who in distraught array,

Pursuing not—for all were fallen or hid
That had been his—athwart the moonlight glid,
Seeking their leader live or dead, as these
Alert to hear those signals cleave the breeze,
Turned at their sound to that protecting rock,
The thus attracted danger quick to mock,
He turned th' unwilling steed, and into night
Vanished from fallen Alonzo's fainting sight.

The wind whizzed past with sea-like sound,
And objects in the moonlight grew
And vanished ; spoke the trampled ground ;
Tall rocks made answer as they flew ;
And heaven's own blue and golden roof
Seemed moving, as that magic hoof
Struck the firm earth from under them !

Harpalian clasped his remnant gem,
And, but for her, this giddy flight
Had been a last new-found delight,
And he had bid th' unguided steed
Where fright might drive, or fury lead,
Bear him—it could not—from his woe ;
Nay, to some horrid chasm go,

And plunge him in, with all he knew,
And, knowing, groaned beneath. To view
Slain friends, slain hope, a pure aim slain,
His world's good murdered!—to disdain
A life made futile his had been ;
So sharp the sickle and nought to glean,
So bent the arm and nought to raise,
So great his soul, so live its rays,—
And earth so empty and so dead,
Sacked by war's fiend, and clothed in red.
But now, as his Cleora's glance
Looked love from its astonished trance,
Dizzy with the unwont' career,
And her firm clasp, not firm with fear,
And her sad looks that childly went
From Past's and Future's frowns, content
To rest on him,—as these reminded
His senses, not quite sorrow-blinded,
What his new purpose was, he reined
The panting steed, and then explained
This last most desperate device :

“What matter, love, how high a price

We give for future happiness ?
My plan is desp'rate, and 'tis this :
Ere now the live have hidden in tombs,
And so must we ; ill fate that looms
Over the unprotected good,
Will follow us, go where we would,
Save in some sepulchre we lie
Kindred to death, till death's passed by.
Yon glistening grave where men decay
From clothéd souls to livened clay,
Great Mexico shall shelter us, till
Her foemen cannot spare to fill
The land around, with savage fear.
Then faith decree us wings to steer
Our course from that polluted air ;
Or why not stay, if, being there,
I needs help break the foemen's bond,
Or never hope the ones beyond,
Self-slavery's fetters, to undo ;
Or being there, I can imbrue
Some secret flame of mightier zeal,
Than men ground down by priestcraft
feel ?

But marvel not ! Disguise I need.
There's near a hermit, one whose greed
Eats his own soul, as drugs he brews
Do others' life ; whom gold can use
As easy and to truer ends
Than he his mouldered spells --who wends
Oft by the moonlight o'er yon hill.
I know his dwelling ; and his skill,
And ancient garb with mine exchanged,
Shall make my semblance all-estranged
From what I am. An ancient seer,
From some far land, with zealous fear
For yonder queen of cities brought,
Shall not amiss be played or thought.
Thou know'st in boyhood I was trained
In dread Mexitli's fane, and gained
No meagre stock of misty lore?
That now shall be a golden store.
For thee--inspiring morning-star !
Patience and heroism are.
The prophet's daughter, who, his art
Has told him in that distant part,

'Will safest be 'mongst they who take
Refuge in yonder fane, and make
The priestess' pupils for time-being—
Such thou must be, we timely fleeing,
Whilst yet the neighbouring country pours
Into yon city's lake-locked doors
Its fearful and its faithful. Think!
At morn we reach the water's brink."

CANTO IV.

Th' abode of Fear was found. The tranquil lake,
Bridged by those massy causeways, and awake
To glitter and murmur round the light canoe
That trustful o'er its open bosom flew,
And studded o'er most strangely, lovelily,
With gay chinampas, floating isles that lie
Like cradles made for ripples to rock, wherein
The flowers whose life that clime most loved to
spin,
And her fierce sons no less, grew infant pure—
(It seemed as though the heavens to allure
Men to obedience, had deigned sprinkle earth,
Not in the frown of storms, but sunshine's mirth,
With rain of their own gardens, live and gay)—
All this was passed, and through the streets their
way
Harpalion and Cleora took, where still
Flowers 'mid the houses bloomed, as if all ill
Must be unknown there, or 'neath garlands hid.
But here and there the labyrinth amid

Those temple-pyramids mysterious stood,
Where quenchless fires, mock symbols of some
good,

Blazed on, and in the tropic dead of night,
Made darkness tremble, if not flee their light ;
Aloft on altars high, like eyes of ghosts,
Though men's might close unwearied at their
posts.

Far o'er th' abodes of flesh, from these tall fanes
The priest each hour would trumpet, at small pains
If through that darkness, to unnerve the tread
Of lonely passengers.

Most near, most dread,
That far-famed temple of Mexitli loomed,
Where wended thousands oft, by conquest doomed
To the inhuman stone to bathe in blood.
How small at first the stream became that flood
Of solemnized atrocity ! How strange
One first heart-rending instance, whence the range
Of thousands more, that, as the city grew,
Clothed it with terror ! This Cleora knew
As the young heard it, in deep mystery drowned
And cringed to ponder whither they were bound.

There, in some deadly chamber of that fane—
Mexitli's mystic sanctuary, the reign
Of Aztec independence scarce begun,
Hence servile vengeance having hardly run
Its destined race in those proud, sombre breasts—
There, not Mexitli's, but Revenge's 'hests,
And priests' unhallowed councils, had conceived
A monstrous tragedy : that thence, bereaved
Of all life's sweets, their former sovereign-lord
Should issue frenzied, vanquished, scourged, and
 awed !

And there Colhuacan's too-trustful king
Stood like all zealous monarchs stand, who bring
Earth's mightiest off'rings to the gods above,
Elate with righteous pride and chastened love ;
His hand upon a fair young daughter's head,
Whom, by the god's commands, he'd thither led,
His only child, to rank from girlhood's morn
Amongst the honoured handmaids that adorn
Mexitli's temple ; and, when years had flown,
And darkness claimed her beauty, to be known
Far as that swelling city's fame could reach,
Or nations learn, or holy prophets teach,

As "mother of the gods;" for pure and bright,
Meet to inspire the heart with sacred might,
Meet to be loadstar of the dauntless soul,
Emblem of all that valour calls its goal—
Her loveliness, the fragrant charm that stole
Now round her maidenhood's untarnished bloom,
Should hallowed be to ages, 'spite the tomb.
There, in that temple labyrinth's deep centre,
Where no assuring smile of day could enter,
Was the fond father parted from his child,
Whilst rose a tumult with harsh music, wild,
Triumphant and mysterious—a sound
Of horridly-exulting priests, that drowned
The stifled cry, and oft-repeated groan,
That else their cruel treachery had shown :
Thrust in his hand the censer, told to fire
Its copal, then th' already trembling sire,
In doubt and darkness did as he was bid.
Past doubt if past belief what darkness hid !
There, to the destined stake expiring bound,
A pool of blood below her on the ground,
The victim he beheld—his child, unheeding ;
Her gentle bosom bared, and gashed, and bleeding ;

The head half-sunk ; the pallid lips apart,
That no more moved to give her labouring heart
A mournful vent, for breath and life nigh fled,
All but those sudden death-pangs' terror, dead,
In them the smile of other worlds contended
With the fierce pain of this, unnatural blended ;
The captive arms still quivering to be free.
The wavy locks, which seem as full of glee
Among the chilly currents that there strive
The off'ring's sense and suffering to revive,
As when breeze-kissed, and crowned with sun-
shine's lustre,
Fall o'er one shoulder in a wanton cluster.
The large deep eyes, yet moist with life's hot tear,
Still flashing as the ever-dark draws near,
Half-lifted, utter for the sinking mind,
Wonder that Heaven, that men, are thus unkind..
“ Whilom my cave above the Eastern sea,
Reflected a prodigious sword of light,
Which shone, broke short, and vanished utterly ;
And strangely whisper all the stars of night :
Moreo'er, beside that cave, an eagle's nest
Was late attacked by sea-birds, clothed in white ;

Till the imperial occupant, sore pressed,
 Beat back th' invaders all, with shattered plume,
But struggled hard ; then 't pined away at rest,
 And doves succeeded. This last sign does loom
Yet dimly and afar ; all else proclaim,
 A dauntless stand must dissipate the gloom
Of threatened woe, with will's prophetic flame."
 Thus in august and sacerdotal throng
The would-be prophet spoke, and soon his fame
 Lashed back distrust by superstition's thong,
And priestly synods called him great ; and more,
 Among the crowd, each word he dropped was
 strong,
Not moving like the fire of orator
 That breezes can puff out, but living still.
Who had not heard it, how this man of lore,
 Had come bestriding with a god-got skill
The Spaniards' four-foot friend, and from the town
 In sullen rage had driven him back, to fill
His masters' hearts with fear of *his* renown ?
 Nor less their curiosity did seem
O'er his fair child, whose every smile and frown,
 And pensive looks, and strange, were converse"
 theme.

The horrors of the siege were creeping on ;
 The causeways blocked, thence frequent came
 the gleam
And after-roar of ordnance ; whitely shone,
 Like wings of peaceful doves those brigantines,
The lake's strange visitors, but preyed upon
 All smaller craft, and furnished double means
For men on land. Well-mapped and deadly made
 The Spaniards' onslaughts proved, and bloody
 scenes
Sickened the sky ; whilst wholly in the shade
 Th' invaders' loss beside their foes' appeared :
Those like as rocks some great magician bade
 Roll 'gainst the sea, by his deep genius steered,
And gradually dislodge it—these like waves
 Fierce, hasty, many, fearless but unfeared,
And rushing on to seethe in common graves,
 Made mountains deep. So daily was some gain
Upon the Aztecs stolen ; and they, the slaves
 Of blinder fury, toiled and bled in vain.

Most terrible, yet most unknown to harm,
 A tower to the besieged that broke amain

The foemen's charge, as if by deep-laid charm,
That warlike seer, the wonderment of all,
Seemed wielding spirit legions at his arm.

How oft such words as these aloud he'd call
When friends fell back: "Behold your dauntless-
dead!

Shall living foes make bridges where they fall—
Pollute them?—Nay! They glory in our tread.

Their prowess leads before, and will ye shame,
Or let it waste unfollowed? Conquer dread,

And victory is yours! Burn—ceaseless flame
Of love that bids you for your homes be bold!

Bind not the foe for sacrifice, and lame
Yourselves so doing. Highest heaven does hold

Them the sword offers unto free-born rights
The goodliest sacrifice; in young and old

There is a godly power that with you fights,
Not when blind fury reigns, but clear resolve.

Offer by it!—so manliness invites,
And then the stars bid cheer as they revolve.

Veterans press on! Shall youth behind-hand be?
Shall lack of old encounter e'er absolve

From cowardice, or give your vigour plea

If 'tis belied ? In each of you there dwells

The strength to think and do new bravery,
And over-reach the tales that hoar age tells ! ”

“Alas !” perchance he thought “am I still young,
Or metamorphosed truly ? Dear life sells

Its truths and woes alike to me ; so wrung
With mourning as I only know to, o'er

The bow I only bent, that 'tis unstrung !
Nay—cheer ! One sympathiser I adore—
Be here my angel, everywhere my hope.”

The while Cleora, fevered and heart-sore,

'Mid hourly horrors her dark way did grope,
And tended e'er with magical success,

'Mongst ghastly wounded crowds for whom did
ope

That motley temple's doors. Ah ! who would guess

That some most-carefully preserved, were foes
Saved for a stately doom—the chill caress

Of fiendish immolation. Around those
(She could not but know who !—how oft she hid,
When thousands rushed to gaze on the death
throes

Of like poor victims) silently she glid
With sick emotions, with too-pitying tears,
And trembling touch. How oft this hell amid,
She thought—what if her sire?—and drowned
her fears
And thoughts of filial tenderness anew,
Bending o'er wretched sufferers, whilst her ears
Rang with far sound of war; and her mind drew
Comparison betwixt her lover's and
This bloody city's spirit, and she grew
More thankful to abhor the sulph'rous brand
Of all its chronic horrors, though thereby
She suffered more, as with disgust 'twas fanned.
Then sometimes she would start, half deem him by,
Bending with her, commanding her kind care
And skill in nursing,—dreams that would but fly,
When from delirium called by the grim stare
Of terrors, whispering "What if he were lost?"
She struggled sorely till she breathed the air
Of firmness, like to his, no longer tossed.
And day by day long wishing for't, she had
The fatherly embrace, and met, not parted, glad.

CANTO V.

AT morn the earth was redder dyed than e'er,
And Mexico's remaining hopes more spare ;
And corpses choked the streets, out-issuing whence
The foetid breath of direst pestilence,
With dark'ning smoke of conflagrations round,
Made deadly every inch of native ground.
Homes dwellerless, and dwellers without home,
Or both confounded like an ocean's foam,
A sea of dreamy, poisonous drugs, wheremid
Some sparks of life lay impotently hid,
And some groaned up, and some in mercy fled—
Each age and sex were there—homes, dwellers,
spread,
Those prey to fire, and these to worser rot,
A growing desolation, and begot,
With famine mingling, woes and fiends untold,
And fear and phant'sies let who dare unfold.

On such a morn, more—could it be—oppressed,
Yet feeling rest in love, unwonted rest,

As those who know they cannot parted be,
Though continents divide and leagues of sea,
But with a magic word again be one ;
Those lovers greeted, not to watch the sun
Ascend the sky—it needs have climbed on smoke—
But momentarily embrace. Cleora spoke :

“ I fear not aught ; these scenes have made me
hard ;

And yet I seem to fear. In yon choked yard,
Tending the sick—’twas yesterday—I caught
A pale priest’s eye : his lineaments methought
Were like to his who on that fatal day
Struck fear in thy men’s hearts (I watched the
fray,

And saw him ghastly in the moonlight stand).
He spoke to me, his manner coldly bland,
But strangeness in his glance, plain phantasy—
‘ How fair thou art!—how good ! Couldst love?—
love me ? ’

My fright said nay ! he laughed, and rambled on,
‘ But that I hate thy sire, though men are wan
With capering death, I’d marry thee. But deem
Thou’lt yet be mine or God’s. Ne’er say I dream :

The god most dread and I, have common cause,
And either's food will do in either's jaws.'
Appalled I was, yet less as he was mad.
Oh, love! that there was aught to make us glad!
That some enchantment could o'erturn this hell,
And make to live such spots I've heard thee tell
Thy fancy paints and thy soul purposes,
Where peace and love may reign, and freedom is;
Where might the years steal on as the sun wends,
And find us looking round on gained friends,
Back on such nightmare scenes as these, before,
To rank the first in a long golden lore
Of happier humanity, and e'er
Blessing each other's sight, with nought to tear
Our looks apart. Forgive me, for I feel
Whilst thou art mine I need no other-weal.
And that thou wilt be yet, and I thine too!—
At least 'tis joy to love thee as I do."

Her lover answered, "Bravely hast thou said!
Not where, but what we are! For downier bed
Grant we await a pyre; in it shall we,
Though flesh consume, more mystically be

Enwrapped in endless Love.—But grant it not!—
Know through the night the struggle's been most
hot;

The enemy is close on our one hand.

Then listen! thou dost know 'the prophet's
band,'

Already famed as strong as crowds beside,
Though few, in sooth: thou know'st I've chosen
and tried,

And taught more deep than they or I would
show,

These few more worthy men. With them I go

To-day to strike a last and desperate blow;

Leading the wilder people; to waylay

Whom of the foe are nearest. If the day

Is ours, so may be more; my fame will spread;

More open we can be—the priests need dread

So many followers as will then be mine,—

And if no greater thing I can design,

'Least safely with these comrades we can flee.

And fear not thou, for fast and faithfully

In secret thou art watched, and doubly shall

Be watched to-day, so for a space—Farewell!"

The day stole on, and sounds of battle swelled
Into one hideous shout, wherein excelled
Now this or this, of the three mouths of war,
When men raged thickest. But a joyful roar
Now seemed to mock Cleora's ears—and yet
Those laughs were fiends' that with fiends' howlings met—
And through the temple courtyard where she
strayed
There came a ghastly throng, with strange parade ;
A gang of prisoners that some short success
Had given to the besieged, round whom did press
A wild, emaciated, craving throng ;
Some dancing like lean satyrs to the song,
A row of priests with knives unsheathed, led.
Nor only they ; some, almost with the dead,
(For no delay might now be had before
The gods—and starving men—had tasted more)
The doomed themselves—nay ! destined to the
skies,
With frantic gestures moved ; a mad disguise,
Like myth-encumbered virtue loves to throw
Over the joys it abrogates below,

A feigned contempt that oversoars them not.
No marvel that she trembled so—but what
So fixed her gaze ? The Spaniards walking there ?
There were but few—in right-dejected air
To be so caught by Satan, save the thought
That martyrdom was passing easy bought,
Cheered haply them ; or was't among th' allies,
Who made the better part, she fixed her eyes ?
Alas ! for there one tall, e'en stately, frame,
Borne as if something scorning those who came
To be its last companions, in attire
Of a Tezcucan chief—it was her sire—
Seemed treading at each step her beating heart,
Fain to have shrieked aloud, to forward dart,
And, bending down, cry, “ Father,” stung in sooth
Into remorse, not doubting her own truth,
But for ill fate, with horror, love, amaze,
She yet restrained herself, and in a haze
Of dreadful thoughts, with but one purpose clear—
To send for him she loved, which love, not fear
Restrained her now, whose influence might bait
The priests for once, save he should come too
late—

She turned, but stole one glance to certain be.
It was too much, she met his eyes, and he,
Angered in truth (but less with *her* perchance),
Yet with an air half-reverent and keen glance,—
With firmer, less fanatic soul endowed
Was the old, easy chief—began aloud :
“ See where she skulks away.” The grisly crowd
Stayed at his accents. “ Stop her ! ’Tis my
daughter—
Hear me—ye men of God ! what chance hath
brought her
Into your gates, save that some fiend be here,
I know not. Disbelieve me ? See what fear
Betrays her where she crouches !—Hear me
through :
This child of mine was stolen by one whom
you
Have cause as much as me to hate ; even him,
The vile enchanter, supple of mind as limb,
Who fought not long ago ’gainst all you love,
With impious boasts to spite the gods above
And mightiest things below. Behold that she
At least does know his whereabouts ! And be

Unmerciful till 'tis confessed ; for though
His outward power be broken, beware—and know
He works you no subtle ill !—belike he's here.
So be Mexitli praised, and my soul clear ! ”

The ghastly cavalcade had passed away ;
Cleora, speechless, but with thoughts to say
Loud in her ear, be—what she could not—strong,
Felt herself 'mongst strange whispers borne along.
And by her side a shape how more than dread,
Laughed like a sorcerer among the dead—
Looked at her long and laughed ; and others
said

“ Well the tribunal sits ! We'll not put off !
Tortures shall tell of him who dares to scoff
And fight against our gods, if she be dumb.”
“ Such as I'll make and kind ones” through the
hum

Of voices struck her most. The place was near,
Where priests—not famished—they had had good
cheer

Of human flesh, but little else, for long—
Sat with the emperor and his nobles' throng,

In grim debate, mock majesty, and rage !
But who had read from life's unselfish page,
Or'd take to be their foe, that true-born seer,
Whom the deluded's pride now doubly veiled in
fear ?

"Praise to our Lady, to the Holy Cross,
And all the saints !—the Fiend shrinks back
abashed."

Such was the Spaniards' shout, as at that spot
Most fierce contested, near'st Mexitli's fane,
The brave besieged gave way. That hooded
wizard,

Who wrought them so much harm ; e'en at the
point

When his did seem the day, and their poor prayers
Knocked at heaven's gate unanswered as they
thought,

Had disappeared. 'Twas strange ! None saw him
fall ;

Nor knew just when some others who had fought
Firmest beside him, with a gloomy will

And how much worse success, assumed command !

But now all prayers were heard—and battering
down

The houses as they went, and trampling o'er
Some remnant flowers of that unmatched display,
Which once had been the place's glory—on,
Amongst the dead, and blood, and burning frag-
ments,

They forced their way. Amid this party was
Now famed Alonzo, who, recovered half
From his foe's sword, but taught to less despise
A so chivalric enemy, was stung
Into a doggéd sternness, beneath which
A paler flame of love, yet truer sort
Than that more arrogance had nurtured, burned
Toward the city whence he fancied yet—
So dim report had stirred his sanguineness—
To snatch Cleora.

At Harpalion's side,
Hurried and panting spoke the while, a friend,
A servant of the temple, one whose eyes
Ere now were opened to the greater light
Of him and his discourse. Recounting how
Cleora had been brought to trial, and plead

The former lover they declared she had,
Had parted from her, ere in his protection,
Who father only by adoption she
Confessed to be, she found relief, and that
She knew not where he was—the council—he
said—

Dissatisfied, and deeming 'twas possessed
Of clues that proved her wrong, with some debate,
Had given the maiden o'er to that sour priest
Whose brain excelled in thinking tortures—him,
And whom he would to aid him. So should they,
If she revealed not where the man was hid,
Drag her to that deep chamber, where dead priests
And grisly potentates, in sort embalmed,
Stood in their winding-sheets erect, around
The hollowed sides, and with their filmy eyes
Stared at each other ; by whose awful dust
The impious and enemies of the State,
Who might not grace the sacrificial stone,
Met horrid fates, and dreadest vows were vowed,
And secrets, that all tortures by the light
Of outer day could draw not, were laid bare :
There would they conjure hers. Harpalion knew

The sacred vault of old, at whose far end
There opened an abyss into the earth
They called Mexitli's well, wherever burned
A quenchless lamp, and whose unfathomed depths
'Twas said were part of ocean underground.
Already he, so said the servitor,
Had fallen with many into disrepute,
And, though yet unsuspected, it appeared,
Would needs attend the council. Nought was
left,
But with this convert to exchange his garb :
He—long a trusted usher and onlooker
Of that unwholesome chamber's secrets—now
Won, not to disavow them but detest.
He then should play his new-found master, and
Arrest the hostile wave—for could they not
Already hear its sullen themward roar ?
A house hard by, whose only tenant now
Was foul-spoke death, a shelter afforded them
For this swift purpose. The disciple strode
With beating heart and stately gait, and felt
With that disguise thrown o'er him not disguised,
But half inspired to be its owner o'er,

And stay all odds ; but what Harpalion's state,
Let who can picture ask not words to tell !

Scarce had that door behind Harpalion closed,
And hardly had his flashing eyes glanced round
The dim-lit sepulchre, when faintly came
A sound of voices from th' adjoining passage,
So hollow, one had thought the shrouded dead
Spoke where they stood. The lover's plan was
formed :

Selecting hastily a darkest niche
As yet unoccupied, he wrapped his cloak
Around his throbbing heart, and entering it,
Stood 'mongst the dead as still as one of them.
Again the door upon its hinges creaked,
And there appeared Cleora, her one arm
Gripped by that fierce fanatic ; after them
Some brother priests, and last two misformed slaves,
Whose duty had become—as if to pay
Nature's unkindness back, to nature's hurt—
To trade in torture. Slow the priest began—
Whilst yet they paused but just within the
chamber,

Tearing Harpalion's heart, whose reason yet
Restrained him : for if there were hope in flight—
Wild hope indeed !—no one of those might 'scape
The trap, and his good sword—" 'Tis well to know,
Before we dare to hide the secrets that
Belong to heaven—(thy manners have betrayed
And poor excuses, and our evidence,
Thou hast what we would have)—'tis well to know
What to expect ! Behold this honoured cave.
The dead are guests at a preparing feast ;
How long and goodly these two hungry rows !
If not what thou dost know, what thou canst feel
Must satisfy them ! How thy tender love
For that reviler would enlivened be,
Wert thou stripped naked, and with outstretched
arms
Bound in yon ancient corpse's fond embrace,
And left alone there with thy lips on his,
Drinking his hollow-kind regards ! Dost tremble ?
What is not in my power to do with thee ?
I say to these my brethren—come or go,
To these my slaves—fetch fire and iron, fetch cord,
To this door—ope or close. At yon far end,

Where hangs the holy lamp, a chasm yawns,
Whose dank and rocky sides go furlongs down,
And then comes water—still, dark, fathomless—
Wherein much gold is dropped, since hope ebbs
low,

Which ne'er shall bless th' invaders' greed ;
'tis kept

By dread Mexitli's eyes, that in those depths,
'Mongst genii dire, and foul, long-feelered creatures,
Make stones afraid. Unrestingly suspent,
In that black, bottomless abyss of liquid,
Thy lover's sire's vile bones have place. Beware,
Or we at last may plunge thee into it.—
At least 'twere good to let her down, so be
Our rope is long, till she can almost mark
The dreaded mystery of the well, and there
May make the rocks in echo to her wail,
Till we—or cut the rope if she refuse ;
Or—but I waste my words.—Such tortures yet
I can devise as what thou'st heard shall seem
But mockeries beside. Dost nought confess ?
First, then, the breast that has so fondly met
The infidel Harpalion, will we brand

With glowing iron—this a cleansing, ere”—
As rolled his eye around, and died his voice
In hissing glee, Cleora gasped for breath.
Speech had forsaken her quite ; imploring looks
Had given place to ones almost as wild
As that poor fiend's beside her—after all
Worse chiefly than his brethren, that he bathed
His subtler mind in ills theirs *could* not compass.
A moment in her heart a something seemed
To rise and say, “ Harpalion bids confess.
Than know thee tortured, thee dishonoured, thee,
Wert only threatened, he would rather death
A hundred times. Oh ! it will torture him.”
She answered, “ For the world's good lives he on ;
For men he loves, if not for him, I die ;
And pray the god who whilom bound our hearts
To guard him as would I, and tell him this.”—
As they were moving on into the cell,
Frantic she broke from that most hated grasp,
And, to her torturers' astonishment,
Rushed t'wards the awful brink, and shrieking
fell—
Into her lover's arms ; then breathless stood

(For deadly intent bore him from her side)
Amazed, recalling the impassioned tone
Wherewith he had assured her that himself,
And no light phantom had encountered her.

The priests, more wonderstruck, first seemed to see-
The spirit-world descend, as forth the dead
Came from his dim recess, and would have-
crouched

Before its unseen horrors, but the sword
Soon changed the fear of nought for fear for life.
The warrior's mind, distracted with the strain
Of manifold perplexities, and then
Tortured unspeakably at all wherewith
That demon foully menaced his beloved,
Because it wounded her, now wore a garb
Of gloom and fierceness foreign to't. How swift
His whirling blade the cruel priest had felled,
(In vain were sacrificial knives held up)
Another and another, one foul slave,
Till only two of that fell company
Might yet be secret bearers : th' other slave,
Who had, alas ! escaped beyond pursuit,

And one poor frantic priest, who, flying from
Th' avenging sword—beneath another's fell—
His flight perchance for hostile impulse ta'en—
A steel-clad Spaniard's, who that moment entered,
Accompanied but by sounds of onslaught dread
(Through which the Aztecs' lamentations pierced
Conspicuous) that down the winding passage
More dismal came. Alonzo's eager search,
Not groundless, though a little at random, now
He saw rewarded. There stood face to face
Th' excited foes! The knight now recognized,
Despite his altered garb, the wizard fierce
Who had protracted brave contentions oft,
When else the Spaniards would have gained what

now

They gloried in. His rival, too, he knew;
And though guessed not the meaning of the scene,
Filled as it was with horrors, shrouded dead,
And new-made bloody corpses, saw, part by
That lamp, part by the torch he held, the girl
He now half-deemed enchanted, and had given
Worlds to have saved for Mercy or himself.
Their swords had met; Alonzo's from the hilt

Broke short, and clattered on the ground. His foe
Took no advantage, but in Spanish tongue,
Summoning as by miracle discourse
From that small knowledge of 't he had, exclaimed,
"To thee be life; I wish thee well of it,
And of thy better self. For me is death;
'Tis well, since there my last high hope is locked,
And Liberty secure. But this fair child
Shall choose her path, if't shall be thine or mine.
I'll speak to her, and do thou watch until
Thou see me not. Then hasten from this place;
Reveal to none; so unexplored shall't be,
And thou live long." Prophetic'ly he spoke;
Then turning to Cleora, who remained
Lost in the sudden joy, through whose bright cloud
The strange succession of events amid
Few hopes and many fears at last began
To float aloft, he drew her to him; then
As suddenly at arm's length holding her,
Unwilling as she was, thus said—" 'Tis o'er!
With my dear projects' overthrow I die,
But am not dead. Thou seest me, and my love
Is fresh as ever, and defeats own self

An unembittered thing. Yet must I flee
These scenes of slaughter, so unrecompensed
By sight of that that only could allure
My hands to deeds of blood. I see the end,
As now we hear the sound of conquest, and
Nor comfort from the stars, but from my heart
The certain degradation of our country
I know full well. My father's voice doth call,
And into yon deep pit I'll follow him ;
Which ne'er was dug by man ; but I have read
Whilom the Earth, so kind but terrible,
Breathed through't her hidden fires, and ages since
Waters succeeded. Oh ! alas ! alas !
My madness pains thy tender heart ; but yet
Believe I am not drawn towards the brink
Impelled by mere despair : it long has seemed,
And seems so more to-day, that we alone,
Thou sweetest soul ! and I, of the strange things
We move amongst are real, and all beside
Ill dreams that only death can supermount.
I fail from earth, from such an earth as now
Shelterless yawns ; for only in ourselves,
Taking the hand of death to be still free,

The energy lives on that surely grows
With spending tho't be spent else vainly,—
lives

As much above death's darkness and her void,
As life's delusions and temptation. Yet
I would not leave the body to rot here
In this accurséd place, with yonder dead—
The mighty earth forbids me, and my sire !—
The thought of separation more than aught
Makes life unwelcome ; but once with the dead,
Although thou live, I shall be e'er with thee.
Thou canst not bid me live if thou art kind ;
But for thyself—have whichsoe'er thou wilt,—
Life and the sunlight with yon friend—think
well !

Or death and this unfathomed gloom with me ? ”

“ With thee ! with thee ! ” she cried, and panting
clung

To his one side, whilst with uplifted arm
He severed the old chain whereby had held
The sacred lamp, and shouted, “ Go before
Poor age-worn mockery, and sink doubly deep.”

They paused as o'er the gulf's tremendous sides
The transient light fled down,—still paused—it
seemed

As though they nothing e'er would hear, until
A faint and hollow sound proclaimed the lamp
Had struck those waters. All was dark below,
And in Alonzo's hand the flickering torch
Gave doubly-trembling rays. Cleora spoke,
Faltering yet bravely, half-reproachfully ;
Rousing herself and gazing in his eyes :
“ Didst think that thy Cleora would live on
If thou shouldst die, or that she values life
When death is welcomer to thee ?—’Tis dark !—
Oh ! that some star of heaven looked calmly
down,

Revealing, for I shall not see, thine eyes !
Nay ! for I feel thy spirit with me—haste !—
I cannot spring but well will cling to thee.”
“ My love ! my love ! we need no kind farewells,”
Harpalion said : “ How infinitely bright
Thou hast made death ! We are about to meet
In bonds of bliss. This moment's victory
Time cannot wash away ! Unchained our souls,

As this poor cradle from our senses fades,
By their mysteriously fostered will
Do nearer draw, and press together through
The portals of an unexplored existence."

The leap was made; the arms of each locked
round

The other, they had disappeared; a murmur
Had 'scaped Cleora's lips—but 'twas of love.
Alonzo stood aghast, nor drew more near
The crater's verge, but glancing fearfully
At the unmoved dead, with hasty step
Regained the passage, whence already smoke,
The burning temple's, came in fitful wreaths;
And scarce had passed into the air, before
A mighty fall of superstructure had
For ever buried that dread cave's approach.

Alonzo kept the secret of the chamber;
And after the first horror, pondered long
On the strange courage of those Mexicans:
For though it caught the frenzied tinge, that spread
O'er time and place which were that people's last,

How could it be of hell? Through life, 'twas seen
A shadow o'er him hung, though cast by what
None knew, and few pretended to discover;
But there beneath his spirit seemed to look
Beyond his time, nor unindignant lie
In custom's talons, and to rather strive
For mankind's blessing than its flattery.
And in the hour of death strange words he said,
And sights did seem to see, that made the priest
Shake his shaven head, and the physician smile
A kind but knowing smile; whilst others wept,
Nor deemed him heretic nor even mad.

THE END.





